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New Data Show Child Sexual Abuse Down 5 Percent Nationally

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Child sexual abuse cases nationwide declined 5 percent from 2005 to 2006, capping a 14-year decline of more than 50 percent, according to an analysis of new data released today by the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire.

In addition, cases of physical abuse declined as well in 2006, down 3 percent since 2005, with a drop of 48 percent since 1992.

"Updated Trends in Child Maltreatment, 2006" by David Finkelhor, director of the center, and Lisa Jones, research assistant professor of psychology at the center, is based on an analysis of data compiled by the federal government from state child protection agencies concerning substantiated child sexual abuse cases.

"When they released the data in early April, federal authorities highlighted only a 1 percent decline in overall child maltreatment, and did not draw attention to the strong declines in sexual and physical abuse. Because the majority of maltreatment cases involve neglect, which actually rose 2 percent from 2005, the trends for sexual and physical abuse were obscured," Finkelhor said.

Thirty-four states experienced drops in sexual abuse cases from 2005 to 2006. Hawaii experienced the largest drop in sexual abuse cases (40 percent) from 2005 to 2006, followed by North Dakota (39 percent) and Idaho (36 percent). A few states experienced increases, such as Rhode Island (53 percent) and Alaska (36 percent).

Since 1992, the vast majority of states have experienced drops in sexual abuse cases, led by Idaho and Arizona with a 94 percent drop in both states, and followed by Alaska (88 percent) and South Dakota (87 percent). Only two states and the District of Columbia experienced increases over that time period.

"It is unfortunate that more attention has not been paid to both the short and long-term declines in sexual and physical abuse, because they represent evidence of an important potential public policy success," Jones said.

Finkelhor and Jones suggest several possible factors as to why sexual and physical abuse cases have declined.

"The period when sexual and physical abuse started the dramatic downward trend was marked by sustained economic improvement, increases in the numbers of law enforcement and child protection personnel, more aggressive prosecution and incarceration policies, growing public awareness about the problems, and the dissemination of new treatment options for family and mental health problems, including new psychiatric medication," Finkelhor said.

Although individual state trends can sometimes be affected by changes in child protection policy or data collection procedures, the consistent and large declines in sexual and physical abuse cases that have continued across so many states across the United States suggest that a real decline in incidence has been occurring, according to the researchers.

While sexual and physical abuse cases have declined nationally, incidents of neglect increased 2 percent from 2005 to 2006, the UNH researchers found. States with large short-term increases in neglect include Delaware, Rhode Island New Jersey, while large declines were observed in Arizona, North Carolina and North Dakota. In the longer term, 1992-2006, the largest increases in neglect have been in Iowa, Oklahoma and New York, with large declines in Vermont, Washington, Alabama and Idaho.

According to the researchers, neglect cases may not have declined nationally because neglect has not had the same level of policy attention and public awareness as sexual and physical abuse. Increased education and recent state and professional initiatives about neglect, including the identification of new forms of neglect such as drug affected newborns, also may mask a decline in other conventional types of neglect.

State-by-state data about sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect cases for the periods of 2005 to 2006 and 1992 to 2006 is available in the center's analysis, which is online at http://www.unh.edu/news/docs/CCRC_childmaltreatment.pdf.

The UNH Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) works to combat crimes against children by providing high-quality research and statistics to the public, policy makers, law enforcement personnel, and other child welfare practitioners. CCRC is concerned with research about the nature of crimes including child abduction, homicide, rape, assault, and physical and sexual abuse as well as their impact. Visit the center online at <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/index.html>.

